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Teachers of Writing Who Write: Finding Voice and Embracing Vulnerability

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December, 2019

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Jeanne Muraco Hurney entitled “Teachers of Writing Who Write: Achieving Voice and Embracing Vulnerability.”

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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“TEACHERS OF WRITING WHO WRITE: FINDING VOICE AND EMBRACING
VULNERABILITY”

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the College of Arts and Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Of

Masters of Arts

in English

Winthrop University

December, 2019

By

Jeanne Muraco Hurney

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to advance the premise that teachers of writing must write in order to establish their own voice and embrace the risk taking that the process entails. Only then can instructors of writing truly impart that knowledge to help students elevate their writing and motivate them to find their own voice. I will argue that eighth grade teachers who know the craft in this personal way are in a remarkable position to have an effect on students' writing to prepare them with skills and power of writing they will need in high school, where the stakes are higher as students' grades and transcripts may affect a choice of college, and beyond, where competence of this life skill matters.

Research on the topic, including a review of literature and a survey written and conducted by me under Institutional Review Board standards, will show that despite logic and scholarly studies that advocate that teachers of writing should write, many do not. This essay will assess obstacles instructors face in this area and offer strategies for increased training or finding time and opportunities to write. Suggestions include action research, blogging, low-stakes writing for publication, and learning communities for reflection and collaboration.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Teaching middle school language arts full time while undertaking a Master of Arts in English, with a concentration Rhetoric and Composition, provides an enlightening perspective in how to view students' abilities and challenges in the classroom, especially when asking them to complete simplified versions of the writing tasks I am asked to perform in graduate-level literature and writing classes. As a result, I am able to share personal stories of research that lead to even more unending research, the process of writing, the courage it takes to put personal thoughts on a page and to be graded on them, the perseverance it takes to work through a difficult section of a paper, and the fatigue that inevitably arises in the education process at some point during the semester. But I also relay the excitement of writing -- the discovery and the light-bulb revelation of thoughts I did not know I had. I speak of the sense of satisfaction after completing each necessary step in the process. As I share my positive experiences as well as late-night travails, several students shake their heads affirmatively, able to connect with those anecdotes.

I came to teaching after careers in several other professions in which the binding thread was writing, holding jobs in politics, journalism, and public relations. In an effort to improve my neophyte pedagogy, I leaped at an opportunity to attend a six-day professional development session on writing-based teaching. The topic meshed well with the curriculum at my school. The professional development program was one that evolved from a workshop created in 1981 by Bard College President Leon Botstein and Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Peter Elbow

(Botstein xi), one in which participants actually write. It is similar to several other writing institutes around the country, such as those offered through networks of the National Writing Project.

Held at the Bard campus in upstate New York, the program I attended was rigorous and creatively intense. Attendees wrote five hours a day in old-school freehand, analyzing a variety of excerpted texts and reflecting on posed questions, filling pages of a college-issue, black spiral notebook. When we were not physically writing or taking meal breaks, we discussed our writing or collaborated on composition projects that modeled pedagogical strategies for our students.

Participants, all instructors of English, traveled from schools in France, China, and Russia as well as other countries, but the majority of colleagues lived in various regions of the United States. What we all had in common was an appreciation for the written word and the desire to improve how we teach writing to better engage our students in the subject area. What we did not realize is that by working to improve our writing pedagogy for our students, the sessions also helped our skill level of writing, too. Through the exercises in an established writing community, many of us were able to rekindle our voices and and experience rather uncomfortable states of vulnerability, a vulnerability that led to an increasing flow of creativity.

We worked individually and together from a windowless classroom and came to know and trust one another in a 14-member writing community. That trust led to an unexpected outgrowth. We were a group of strangers who had met only days ago, yet, unexpectedly, shockingly, classmates began sharing private details in their writing, as

personal as a brother getting arrested or how debilitating shyness affected a career. The participants revealed frailties that I attribute to freed spirits, [floating gingerly](#) through the personal riskiness and liability associated with writing as a craft. The safe community allowed us to strip writing down to its raw core, exploring our true voices, with all their originality and personal style; it was an experience I am now able to share with my students to get the most out of their writing, at least those committed and courageous enough to delve into that space.

Feeling like a dedicated writer for the first time in a long time, I credit that sheltered community to pushing me to explore inner emotions and create phrases that came from a deeply safeguarded part of the soul and truly experience the sensation of exposing sheer pain and ultimate strength through writing and creating. That supportive enclave in Hudson-on-Annandale, N.Y., also allowed another teacher to share her revealing detail. When the Bard instructor assigned a formal three-page essay with a rough draft due the following day, a 10th-grade English teacher from New England felt safe to share her trepidation when it came to writing: “I haven’t written a paper in twenty years.”

It was a comment that, at first, gave me pause. I had been working through an advanced degree in English and wrote paper after paper that took up a good deal of my off time. That set me to question how many other teachers of writing -- teachers of the language -- who presumably assign and assess formal essays several times a year, have not written a paper or produced formal writing in recent memory. That question further

opened to discussion among colleagues and students. It ultimately led to research on the topic and the discovery that that Bard instructor is not alone.

Through inquiry and research, I learned that teachers who do not write spanned grade levels. That stated, sandwiched between seventh-grade writing-to-the-test composition classes and high school, where transcripts matter, it is my contention that eighth-grade writing teachers have a remarkable opportunity to create a bridge for students, honing tools necessary for writing at a secondary-level and beyond by laying the groundwork for skillful writing, helping students to develop their style and voices. It helps tremendously when provided the opportunity to write themselves.

This thesis will argue that in order to best serve students, instructors must write and be given every opportunity to write, to pursue their highest level of efficacy at the craft, to find voice and to experience the vulnerability of writing, and to share that knowledge in the classroom. If literacy is reading and writing, then teachers who read should be teachers who write. Professional development opportunities to do so are somewhat available, but many obstacles exist for writing instructors -- or any teacher for that matter -- to take advantage of them. Leaders in the profession must work to create solutions to offer teachers of writing more opportunities to write in a conducive, creative environment for the betterment of students.

Chapter Two of this essay will examine academic literature that exists to underscore and argue the point that teachers of writing should write. In Chapter Three, I will address why many teachers of writing do not write and include design, distribution, and interpretation of a survey to teachers of English and how it relates to research.

Chapter Four will discuss professional development opportunities and obstacles to take advantage of them, as well as offer strategies for teachers of writing to write, in particular, strategies for eighth grade writing teachers to write.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A wide body of literature—thousands of scholarly articles and books—exists on the subject of writing teachers, their pedagogy, and writing practices. A brief overview of history of the development of writing pedagogy is useful here to show how it has changed through the years and how writing instructors, to stay current in their discipline, have had to adapt their strategies in the classroom.

In the United States, rhetorical pedagogy that began in 1806 at Harvard University as traditional rhetoric, a school of thought used to adequately shape student writers, morphed with the proliferation of colleges after WWII. It was during the 1960s, 1970s, and onward when writing theories emerged and moved away from the emphasis on the end product of writing and focusing on the process (Perl xi). Scholar Peter Elbow advocated expressivism, a theory focused to help students find their voice through “integrity, spontaneity, and originality” (Faigley 151). In his essay “Closing My Eyes As I Speak,” Elbow encourages writing “for the *sake* of self but not *to* the self. The goal is not to communicate but to follow a train of thinking or feeling to see where it leads” (Elbow 187). A student of the practice eventually recalled, “writing became expression and communication, a people-filled endeavor, in which I let the acts of writing, workshopping, and revising help me discover what I had to say and what I meant to

say” (Burnham and Powell 111). Indeed, the process of discovery is an element in writing classes that is not examined in great length and should be a topic of discussion. Later, theorists such as Janet Emig and Sondra Perl steered pedagogy to accepting that writing is a composing process, with Emig offering “developed scientific models to explain the writing process as a series of recursive stages” (Ray 90). Perl, Professor Emerita of English at Lehman College, wrote of her observations of the writing process in “Understanding Composing,” noting that it “is important to look at what writers do while writing and what an analysis of their processes reveals” (Perl 141). In the 1980s, Linda Flower and John Hayes espoused thinking out loud as part of the process, making “strong theoretical claims in assuming relatively simple cognitive operations produce enormously complex actions” (Faigley 156). In addition, Arthur N. Applebee and Judith A. Langer delved into the consequences of writing and how different types of writing influence the learning process as well as other studies on teaching and writing. These theories and research serve as a foundational backdrop for how we look at teaching teachers of writing to write.

In their book of essays *Teaching Writing Teachers of High School and First-Year Composition*, editors Robert Tremmel and William Broz draw on the research of Chris M. Anson, a Distinguished Professor of English at North Carolina State University and Director of Campus Writing and Speaking Program, noted for his work on developing teachers of writing: “Anson’s first imperative for writing teachers is the beginning point and the turning point: writing teachers must be a writer. This has been a constant since [Carl] Klaus’ NDEA Institutes in the 1960s, through [Richard] Gebhardt’s balanced

design in the 1970s, through proliferation of writing projects in the 1980s, to the present” (Tremmel and Broz 50). The writing project referenced is the National Writing Project, which began as the Bay Area Writing Project in 1974 in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley.

The National Writing Project was developed to examine and advance the teaching of writing, responding to numerous statistics suggesting that student writing across grade levels needed improvement, and an assertion that stills exists today. Despite English teachers’ efforts, studies show that students are woefully unprepared “to write well enough to meet the demands of school or the workplace” (Graham and Perin 445). The proliferation of first-year writing programs after the growth of colleges post-WWII, programs is proof that many students need remedial help in this area. High school teachers, too, grumble about the lower levels of sophisticated writing, of which a student’s lack of skills result in poorer grades, which may affect his or her options for college or other career.

Perhaps because of the grade level or curriculum, some teachers do not require or have to grade formal, academic writing. There are certain grades where language arts instructors turn their attention to preparing students for statewide writing assessments, tests that play a role in school funding or job security or both. In North Carolina, for example, the state assesses grades four, seven and ten on different writing skills: fourth grade on an imaginative narrative, seventh grade on argumentative writing, and tenth grade on a cause-and-effect essay. Many seventh-grade teachers devote class time two to three days a week to prepare students for the state writing test (Blacklocke).

Applebee and Langer in their 2009 article, “What is Happening in the Teaching of Writing,” note the changes in teaching writing due to public policies, such as No Child Left Behind, technology, and assessments. They look at statistics from eighth grade and twelfth grade, and make a point that “it has been almost 30 years since the last systematic look at writing instruction in middle schools and high schools in the United States,” (Applebee and Langer 18) and that was published ten years ago.

Focusing on eighth-grade writing, a 2011 study “Grade 8 National Results” by the U.S. Department of Education slotted student samples into three categories: basic, proficient, and advanced. The study showed that 80 percent of samples were “at or above basic level, described as “partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge,” but that number dropped to 27 percent at or above “proficient” level, which is described as demonstrating “competency” (National Assessment of Educational Progress). That means less than one-third of all eighth-graders meet the definition of proficiency, in which writing errors do not impede meaning. In the U.S. Department of Education’s report “Grade 12 National Results,” statistics for grade twelve students, a percentage of whom will be attending college classes with intensive writing requirements, showed a 27 percent proficiency rate. Several factors contribute to these low numbers, including technology that does not necessitate proper sentence structure, student motivation, and lack of skill development in formative years, among others. Regrettably, this decline affects students of all levels from kindergarteners up through the academic chain.

The National Writing Project believes that teachers who write can help improve those scores; one of the NWP’s core principles listed on its website is “experience in

writing” as a way to gain “knowledge about the teaching of writing” (NWP). That organization has since grown from nine site cities to more than 200 site cities, a growth that indicates the increasing demand for writing teachers to continue to sharpen their strategies and elevate their teaching in the classroom as a way to help students develop their skills.

Though literature that proposes that teachers of writing should write seems logical, there are competing viewpoints in articles that date back to the late 1970s. Gregory W. Brooks, who was an assistant professor in the School of Education at St. John Fisher College, discusses two of those perspectives in his 2007 article, “Teachers as Readers and Writers and as Teachers of Reading and Writing.” In it, Brooks cites studies by researchers Alan Frager, Tim Gilespeie, and G.L. Susi that find that the way teachers “think of themselves as writers” influences how they teach the subject of writing (Brooks 179). On the other hand, Brooks also cites work by Anne Gleeson and Vaughan Prain, and Bruce Robbins that state additional factors, such as a teacher’s focus on developing a student’s personality in writing or a teacher using examples of professional writing as a substitute for one’s own, have more of an effect (Brooks 179). In my estimation both are required to provide students with models to emulate.

Teachers’ perceptions of themselves as writers as a marker for how they teach writing makes for an interesting argument given the various types of writing required in a teacher’s day. Teachers craft emails, create lists, and take notes in professional meetings and more. They may argue that they write well, but are emails, lists, or notes an accurate measure of writing mastery? Any instructor who writes emails to parents understands the

rhetorical skills and empathy required to be effective communicators; as such, the aim is not to downplay that type of writing. Rather a bigger question would be what types of writing fall under the category of what would merit self-assessment and develop a person's perception as a writers? Brooks addresses this topic when he writes about teachers who participated in a study who "were sufficiently competent writers, [but] some did not consider themselves writers because they did not believe that their type of writing qualified as especially illuminating, interesting, or significant" (Brooks 178). Even some teachers question whether their daily writing is worthy of assessment.

Brooks' second viewpoint-- that teachers who focus on developing student voice without modeling their own writing can be effective in the classroom – is one worth exploring. The problem is that the body of research does not support or promote case studies exemplifying this model of removing a teacher from the learning, thinking, and "discovery" of writing (Murray 1). It is interesting to note that Brooks' example of "providing stimulating examples from books, newspapers, and cartoons" to teach writing, only "occasionally" using a teacher's writing (Brooks 179) is based on studies from 1996, more than twenty years ago. Indeed, the idea of a teacher bypassing the modeling method seems lacking in credibility or authority, akin to a surgeon who has not studied modern practices or made an incision in years, instructing first-year residents, scalpel in hand, about the procedure. E. Shelley Reid, an associate professor of English and director of composition at George Mason University, who teaches teachers of writing, states that programs should set "goals that extend beyond the notion that writing teachers should demonstrate high competency in their field" (Reid 197). She advocates for writing

teachers to “become confident, lifelong writers...who are able to draw upon their own expertise, to feel confident enough to innovate” (Reid 200). Indeed, it is confidence in content and skills that a teacher brings to the classroom that students can latch onto and build off of in their own work.

Donald M. Murray, noted instructor of composition and Professor Emeritus of English as who was also a journalist, lamented that his “teachers were well intentioned but they were readers who did not write themselves. They looked at published writing and imagined how it was made” (Murray 18). His reflection as a student, well before his journalism and teaching careers took hold, suggests that even developing writers make assessments on teachers who do not write, underscoring the idea that teachers’ engagement and attitudes toward writing, however hidden, still may be detected and incorporated into student thinking.

Teachers should be confident in their skills to provide differentiated learning strategies for student writers. Writing is such an intimate and individual medium that teachers must have a variety of tools available to address all levels of students -- to draw out the student who is struggling to articulate what topic he or she even wishes to write about all the way to the highest level of student who by eighth grade already chooses to use more than ten sources in a literary analysis. These scenarios speak to voice and vulnerability: who is still developing rudimentary skills and who is ready to seek a higher plane. Murray states it is through the active writing process that writers “discover what they have to say” (Murray 19) and how to teach students to say what they have to say. Teaching students voice “may be the most important element in writing, the one that

seduces the reader, makes the reader trust the writer, makes the reader feel an individual relationship with the writer, forces the reader to turn the page” (Murray 8). It is the personality and tone and technique that a writer brings to the small, white rectangle.

Established theorists address voice as the element of writing in “which a sense of writer is [present] even in research-based writing” (Burnham and Powell 113). Elbow takes the premise further when he describes voice as that that “empowers individuals to act in the world. He sees it as political action. Writing thus becomes a form of political or social activism” (Burnham and Powell 115). Writing with voice can be a catalyst for change in the world as exemplified in the political realm: Alexander Hamilton wrote an essay to improve his lot in life as an orphan in St. Croix, eventually becoming the United States Treasury Secretary, and Thomas Paine wrote “Common Sense, a political pamphlet that changed the course of a nation. Whether infusing personality into writing or taking an unpopular stance on an issue, writers who add their voice also face a vulnerability to writing, and if there is any flaw or void in current research, this trepidation about personal discovery and risk-taking may be it. As teachers, we ask students to take risks when we assign self-reflections or peer editing. At an eighth-grade level in which social status and fitting in to a group is crucial, some students cringe at having a peer see their work. Some teachers feel the same. Yet, if instructors do not develop or recognize their own voice through writing, how can they teach it?

Indeed, teacher attitudes toward writing affect their practices in the classroom as studies have shown. Citing the work of numerous researchers, Elizabeth Bifuh-Ambe at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, relays that in “empirical studies in elementary

through high-school, classroom-writing instruction have demonstrated that teachers' beliefs about writing and perceptions about themselves as writers can impact their writing instruction and students' writing development" (Bifuh-Ambe 138). If teachers do not have the confidence in their own writing skills, the classroom curriculum can change to avoiding writing altogether or returning written work with few comments or constructive feedback because a teacher may not know the remedy to help that student. That outlook is transferred to students either consciously or unconsciously.

While scholarly research acknowledges that teachers of writing should write, it also acknowledges that many teachers do not write. In an article entitled, "You Can't Write Writing," Wendell Johnson, who taught psychology at the University of Iowa at the graduate level back in the 1940s, disparaged teachers of English because of the ineffective writing skills he saw in his classroom. He admonished teachers for their failure: "They do not appear to utilize to any considerable extent the principle of teaching by example. They tell students how to write and how not to have written, but they don't, as a rule, do any actual writing" (Johnson 534). Johnson noted that the issue was a problem for many graduate schools and needed to be addressed. More than sixty years later, Anson also relays concern: "In my work with hundreds of writing teachers, especially those teaching grades K-12, I have been troubled to discover how little the teachers themselves write. Most engage in school-related tasks, such as writing progress reports on students, but very few write the kinds of texts they ask their students to write: descriptions and stories, poems, argumentative essays, summaries of important readings" (Anson 38). If this is so, this is a missed opportunity for teachers of writing to

engage and reflect on the assignments that they are requiring of their students. Being able to dissect an assignment and understand what a student goes through in the process is crucial to being a more dynamic teacher. We create answer keys for multiple choice tests, matching, and fill-in-the-blank assessments; why not write an essay assignment as a baseline for knowledge and to better appreciate the work of students.

Anson writes in his essay “Teaching Writing Creatively” that the most “effective” teacher development programs require “active learning and participation, of experiencing what we teach, of teaching what we experience, and of seeing the development of expertise as an ongoing pursuit” (Anson 27). Rather than listening to a speaker or anyone at a podium telling an audience how to teach, it is more productive for an instructor to engage in an activity and experience the assignment. It is the difference between watching a ski run on television while sitting on a sofa or experiencing the whistling wind and bristling chill on the cheeks while schussing down the slopes. Which is more enjoyable to talk about with peers? Which will evoke more descriptive and engaging language?

The review of literature makes clear that teachers of writing should write as a benefit to students through finding voice, experiencing risks, creating empathy, and demystifying the writing process, four topics which will be discussed later in the paper.

CHAPTER 3: WRITING IN THE SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES

Writing is a critical skill not only in a school environment for teachers of writing, but in many other careers. Legislators craft legal documents, while marketing officials and

advertisers write press releases on product information; people in the trades create invoices and work orders that require written precision in diagnostics and supply orders. Of course, professors and researchers rely on published articles to further their area of expertise as well as their standing in the community. In a study of writing instruction, Tanya Santangelo states, “the ability to compose represents a fundamental and essential competency for both children and adults” (Santangelo 5). Writing is necessary “for every college class, for work, and for life in general” (Carter and Harper 295). Despite that pronouncement, there exists a gap in writing competency and what actually occurs in our education system (U.S. Department of Education). Teachers who are trained to write and do it consistently can help to bridge the gap that seems to be widening each year. The increase in the use of technology and texting has affected students’ writing in complete sentences and paragraphs, which is a topic of numerous academic articles. Students need much practice writing, and teachers who are competent in modern writing pedagogy and methods can address the skill deficiency by writing themselves.

Yet, to much dismay, about one-fifth of our nation’s teachers have no background in writing, according to a study by Gary A. Troia and Stephen Graham. The researchers polled 11,494 teachers and from the response of 482, “20.7 percent of teachers indicated they had taken no coursework during their credentialing teacher preparation programs that included content related to writing instruction” (Troia and Graham 1725). The researchers also state that “11.6 percent of the respondents indicated they had made no personal efforts to learn about writing instruction” (Troia and Graham 1728). The authors did not delineate who among those respondents were teachers of English Language Arts; yet and even still, the numbers are remarkable. Efficacy in writing is not just an

elementary or middle-school issue as research identifies that “declining writing ability has been a mounting concern for those involved in secondary and higher education” even at the Ph.D. level (Carter and Harper 287). One professor who supervises doctoral candidates states plainly that “the majority of the studentsdo not write at the level often expected in a doctoral program” (Rodriguez et al. 57). For students with learning challenges, writing at a qualified level becomes that much more difficult, affecting “education, employment and other life pursuits” (Santangelo 5). Indeed, teachers of writing should not only be effective writers, but they must also understand writing anxiety and the myriad ways to help push students through the obstacles. Only with the experience of sitting at a desk and staring at a blank ominous white light before them will they truly comprehend the hardships some students face.

The level of writing has come to such a state, that according to a website “Online Learning Insights,” applicants to some colleges may “submit a video essay in place of a written one” (Morrison), although that could not be confirmed on those college websites. Morrison also cites a study by The National Conference of State Legislators stating that “the need for remediation [in first-year college writing] is widespread. Thirty-four percent of all students at public colleges and universities enroll in at least one remedial course,” and at two-year colleges, that percent rises to 43 (Morrison). Are middle and high school teachers not alarmed by these statistics? How do students who pass eighth grade and graduate from high school still move on to college without basic skills in writing?

Some scholars point out that the weak link lies in the quality of pedagogy programs at the university level, programs that turn out teachers for K-12 institutions. Sandra Stotsky, formerly a commissioner in the Massachusetts Department of Education who supervised the state's teacher licensure program, writes, "it has become increasingly clear that education schools as they now function are a major part of the problem and not the solution to improving public education and narrowing the gaps in student achievement" (Stotsky 44). She calls out the discrepancy in the lack of content area among our nation's teachers versus the emphasis on pedagogy, stating that continuing education in subject matter is "not enrichment of updating," but "remediation" (Stotsky 44). Jeffrey Zorn, a senior lecturer of English at Santa Clara University supports hiring teachers who are writers themselves. He goes so far as advocating taking writing instruction out "from under departments of literature and departments or subdepartments of composition studies" (Zorn 271). His stance is to recruit "practitioners" of writing to teach the classes" (Zorn 272). It will no longer be a requirement to have an English degree. His vision of writing instruction will be "open to strong writers and teachers from every academic specialization, with or without Ph.D.s or even M.A.s in hand. These syndicates will decide for themselves what is needed to get through to particular students on a particular campus" (Zorn 283). This is an interesting take on how to approach the teaching of writing, one that likely will ruffle English teachers of literature, who, to be fair, are writers themselves. They are versed in assigning writing to students and spend hours providing constructive feedback on student papers. Zorn's commentary reincarnates the argument among academics as to whether the theorists or practitioners of writing are best suited actually to teach writing courses. By practitioners, does Zorn only

mean other academics as a positive influence on students? Would Zorn open his door to a Maya Angelou in her day, both an academic at Wake Forest University and a commercial success, or poet Billy Collins, who taught workshops in Dublin? Would Hunter S. Thompson, who met success writing novels such as *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, with his self-professed drug-addled brain, fill his requirements as a practitioner? Who can say who will be more effective in improving student writing? The point is that anyone who writes can work toward finding voice and embracing vulnerability. That is what instructors of writing can do to instill and impart these ideas in students.

Teachers of writing are recruited in a variety of ways which influences how writing instructors are trained, impacting their effectiveness in the classroom with students. At the university level, teachers can earn a degree in education from Colleges of Education or earn a degree in English from Colleges of Arts and Sciences. There exists differing opinions about the efficacy of those programs. Stotsky criticizes Colleges of Education when she cites U.S. Department of Education Statistics that “candidly described as ‘minimal or nonexistent requirements for entry into teacher education programs’ and ‘less academic rigor than required for other college programs’” (Stotsky 55). She writes, ‘too many new teachers entering the classroom in recent decades have neither an adequate understanding of the subject matter they are supposed to teach nor an adequate understanding of how to teach it’ (Stotsky 55). That is a fairly large indictment of novice teachers across the board as well as the programs that turn out teachers and people who mentor them in their careers. Some argue that colleges of pedagogy do not teach content area, and, as a result, there exists a gap in effectiveness in the classroom.

Still another avenue for future instructors of writing are programs at university level that offer licensure certificates, such as Queens University in Charlotte and the University of North Carolina Charlotte. Those programs require classes and pedagogy, technology, and if pursuing secondary language arts, several literature courses, which are writing intensive. They do not, however, require a class in writing or writing pedagogy, speaking from personal experience. Even so, a lack of writing specific pedagogy classes does not preclude one from learning in the future. That is where professional development can come in, which will be discussed later in this essay. As teachers, we commit ourselves to lifelong learning as part of the pedagogy. As teachers of writing, engaging in writing, taking the time to write is part of the objective in becoming an effective teacher of writing.

The National Council of Teachers of English, in a position paper updated November 2018, states it succinctly: “Everyone is a writer.” In “Understanding and Teaching Writing: Guiding Principles,” the NCTE, the professional organization for teachers of language arts, also declares under “essential principles for teaching writing” that “writers grow when they have opportunities to expand on -- and not merely transmit -- content knowledge” (NCTE). While scholarly research supports teachers of writing to write, this is a directive from teachers’ own organization to build on their content and not merely share it, especially in the teaching of writing. As in most professions, keeping current in technology and methodology is essential in our 21st century global economy, and teaching is no different.

In addition to academic research and professional organizations, many teachers in the trenches at the secondary and middle school level agree that teachers of writing should write as well. High school English teacher Kelly Gallagher, in his book *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, leaves no room for fluctuation in his view on the subject, stating “teachers must write” (Gallagher 49). The instructor and author of writing pedagogy books advocates for teachers to write because “students must see the process in action” (Gallagher 48). Gallagher calls for teachers to be models of writing in the classroom because students “don’t need a teacher who assigns writing; they need a teacher who demonstrates what good writers do” (Gallagher 48). He made a name for himself not only as a writing teacher but as a former co-director of the South Basin Writing Project at California State University, Long Beach, in which successful teachers teach other teachers.

Despite the body of scholarly research and the NCTE advancing the premise that teachers of writing should write, many do not (Anson 38), often, for reasons described below. I wanted to learn why writing teachers do not write first-hand by surveying other writing instructors. As such, I drew from my journalism background and conducted personal interviews in compliance with the Institutional Review Board. I also designed a survey with anonymity and time constraints in mind for those in the professional district in which I teach. I wanted the survey to be anonymous because our population is relatively small, and many of us know one another. I wanted to encourage honest answers. One limitation to this survey was time to accumulate answers, as a larger sample and response would have been ideal. I chose a Google document for the survey for its

ease of use -- mainly clicking off boxes -- and for minimal effort and a quick turnaround from responders.

The survey itself consisted of 15 questions with four differing answers to check off. The first part of the survey addressed questions about teachers' experiences with writing during a work day. For example, teachers were asked how often they wrote in a day and what types of writing were performed, whether it be crafting emails, creating tests or quizzes, researching academic papers or dabbling in more hobby-like endeavors. Teachers also were asked to assess obstacles that prevented writing and to remark on attendance at professional development writing seminars. Instructors were questioned if they had ever pursued publishing their work. The second part of the survey addressed what types of writing were assigned in the classroom and how often. Instructors also were asked how they assess written work-- with a rubric, holistically, informally, peer review or other. The survey concluded with basic queries about how long a teacher has been in education and the pathway to the classroom, via an education program, Teach for America program or other.

To comply with policy of the professional community, an assistant superintendent forwarded the survey to principals of five schools in the region who then forwarded them anonymously to twelve eighth grade teachers. With this sample size, the project was not meant to be one examining far-reaching statistical data or even empirical data, but rather to highlight patterns revealed through teacher surveys and personal interviews with teachers of writing and instructors who teach teachers of writing. In the end, four teachers returned the questionnaire which was somewhat disappointing and reflected to this

questioner that helping someone seek a higher level of education and professionalism was not a priority. Some answers were predictable; others somewhat revealing.

A review of the responses recounted that half the participants wrote one to two hours a day and nearly all spent writing time answering emails, creating tests and quizzes, or meeting/organizational note taking. While three teachers wrote on a personal level, only one stated any time with formal writing, such as essays or academic papers. All responded yes to enjoying writing, with creative writing listed as the favorite type of activity. In terms of obstacles to teacher writing, it is telling, yet hardly shocking, that all answered time, with one elaborating that “continuous grading of assignments, assessments, and student writing, as well as creating new lesson plans and units” crippled willingness to write. Two, however, expressly stated a lack of motivation to write. This commentary was a bit striking in that writing is as much a component of the career as is reading, which English teachers, on the whole, are avid about. Teachers in my school often discuss their book clubs and ask for recommendations for novels. Many English teachers that I am acquainted with have several titles on their must-read lists, much like food enthusiasts keep a list of trendy restaurants showcasing the latest cuisine. Writing does not seem to merit the same zeal.

When asked when was the last time they had written formally or for publication, two participants answered that they wrote such a piece in the last year. However, another pushed that time frame to two to four years, and the last stated that it had been more than five years since engaging in an academic writing activity. Despite the lapse in years since writing for some, interestingly, three answered affirmative to the query, would they

consider an opportunity to write in a professional writing group and on what time basis?

Three stated they would commit to once a month, while the last participant chose four times a year.

The survey also asked teachers about assignments. All four noted that they assigned research papers, journals writing, note taking, and reflection papers, while only two assigned real life writing and digital media writing on average of three times a week. One stated assigning writing tasks daily. All participants assessed writing based off of a rubric, with three adding peer review as alternative assessment. Two assessed writing informally.

The most enlightening part of the survey, however, was how teachers responded to the question, what is your attitude toward assigning writing in the classroom? Among the comments were “They need it! Would like to assign more,” and “I think there is no other way to teach literacy!” Said another, “Writing is a necessary skill and should be assigned and assessed regularly.” The energy that exudes from these statements is a testament to teachers’ enthusiasm and knowledge that “writing is critical” and a “part of life” (NCTE), but also slightly ironic in light of overall statements from teachers about the subject. The last comment from a question on the survey was more a reflection of reality in school culture: “it needs to be done, but it is a lot of work on the teacher.”

From the responses, it is clear that instructors of English agree that writing is a necessary part of the curriculum and must be assigned; however, the last comment is significant because many teachers already are overburdened by the demands of the job and their obligations to students. To analyze teacher responses as to why they are not

writing and what obstacles stand in the way, I examined patterns from the survey, personal interviews, and popular culture periodicals to reveal four major reasons.

First, lack of time is the overriding challenge to writing. Mrs. A. teaches nearly one hundred eighth grade students in a small professional community in which ancillary obligations such as lunch duty, carpool duty, and parent meetings during, are obligatory and part of the requirements of the job. The teacher describes a part of her day: “Between going to the gym for the assembly, the phone ringing, attendance in the morning, I have no time to grade or to plan. As a team leader, I’ve had no time to breathe whatsoever.” Mandatory lunch duty shaves off thirty-five minutes of planning or grading time. Carpool duty cuts into any after school time to plan or grade and can last from ten to twenty minutes depending on the weather and whether the traffic officer shows up. Sometimes, when a teacher calls in ill and a substitute cannot be found, administrators assign on-duty teachers to cover the sick teacher’s classes, taking away yet another planning period. Parent meetings are scheduled during either of two forty-minute planning periods, and they take priority no matter how much grading or preparation must be done that day. In addition, parent meeting requests for struggling children seem to be on the rise in recent years with students facing an increasing amount of emotional and circumstantial issues. “We are dealing with the usual suspensions, which kids bring onto themselves, but some of the issues are real -- parents who are having kidney transplants or open heart surgery -- and want to meet to make sure their children are supported at school. There are all kinds of things going on in their world, and we have to be cognizant of it.” Mrs. A’s home obligations and caring for children obviously also share part of the limited twenty-four

hour day. “Being here and trying to be engaged for the kids even if they have something going on at home is one thing, but how can you give up time with your family?” she said.

The workload of composition teachers also precludes teachers of writing to write; they are too behind in their grading and preparation to think about writing. While teachers of writing do find the task to be worthwhile on its face, composition teachers know full well the hours of chained-to-the-chair off-duty labor grading papers when they assign an essay. States Leah Shafer, a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the former director of Harvard’s Expository Writing Program and the founder of the Harvard Writing Project, who has been researching teacher response to writing for decades: “Responding to students’ writing takes more time, thought, and energy than any other aspect of teaching” (Shafer). She adds, “if teaching involves leaps of faith, responding is one of the greatest leaps because we have so little direct evidence of what students actually do with our comments, of why they find some useful and others not” (Shafer). Indeed, it is disheartening to spend precious time poring over a student’s paper, providing feedback for the student to reach another skill level, only to pass back the work and find it in the trashcan without just a glance at the grade and no care about comments. As the emphasis on grades has become the benchmark for students, once they know their marks, digesting the comments to improve their writing skills is a low priority. Nevertheless, reading essays is part of the job of a composition teacher and one that devours the most amount of time. For those teaching four blocks of classes with 20-30 students or more in each class, giving a written assignment can mean reading and commenting on eighty to one hundred essays or more. At seven to ten minutes for a one-to-three page essay,

grading and commenting on work requires almost twelve to seventeen hours after a workday or on a weekend, maybe more.

Another teacher reports a lack of free time for different reasons. Hope Brown, a high school history teacher in Kentucky was featured in an August 2018 *Time Magazine* series, “Economic Hardship Reporting Project.” In the article, Brown describes how her low teacher pay necessitates that she work two jobs to make ends meet, putting in a full day from 5 a.m. at school before going to a “second job manning” gates and guests at Rupp Arena for extra money, in addition to selling plasma twice a week (Reilly). While that situation appears dire, when a teacher is in survival mode due to low pay or devotes off time to family obligations, writing in any context takes a low priority. Writing well is a process that takes time and, for the most part, cannot be completed in one sitting; it requires research, planning, retrospection, and revision. Anson, a professor of writing himself, encapsulates teachers’ lack of time for writing as “a work life so burdened that there is simply no time to devote to contemplation or to drafting and revising and tinkering with a document that may seem to do little to advance one’s professional standing, improve one’s teaching, or make a difference to one’s supervisors” (Anson 38). Anson makes a solid point when he suggests that writing may not affect status with supervisors. A secondary or middle school teacher who writes may not reap any more than a pat on the back from administrators, if that, and certainly not an extra financial boost, as it is not part of the job description as it is for college professors. The most lucrative benefit it likely could bring is if a teacher decided to pursue a position in

another school system that offered more money. College professors, on the other hand, are required to write as part of their job descriptions.

Second, lack of motivation. Teachers who responded to the survey endure eight-hour-plus days, administering to nearly one hundred or more students in class, only to return after dismissal to a cluttered desk, stacked with essays to be graded, which English teachers, especially, find overwhelming. It is easy to understand how many people would not be in the mindset to write even for thirty minutes. It takes a clear mind and inspiration and energy. Professional writers who began as teachers in the classroom can empathize with lack of motivation. Writer Stephen King, who once taught high school English in Kittery, Maine, bluntly weighs in on creative output of English teachers when he says he has “no doubt teaching sucks away the creative juices and slows production...Even when you have the time, it’s hard to find the old N-R-G” (Lahey). Indeed, Mrs. A., exasperated after a trying afternoon with students, says that a challenging day can “suck the energy out of you.” Writing would be one of the last activities a teacher would think to do to after a less-than-ideal day.

Though teachers may not have the time or motivation to write, academic studies say that the mindset to avoid demanding writing does a disservice to students. Students learn through modeling and “are more likely to become successful, enthusiastic, and engaged readers and writers when they learn from and are among teachers who display the same traits” (Brooks 177). In a speech to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Washington 2009, then-President Barack Obama said, “from the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the

income of their parents, it's the person standing at the front of the classroom'" (Blume and Mehta). If a teacher does not feel adequate, efficient, or motivated toward writing, that certainly will influence students. Teachers who write alongside students in a classroom or share previously written projects from a variety of authors have the ability to impart the problem-solving aspect of the writing process. Teaching eighth-grade students how to blend a quote into an essay takes on a heightened level of interest among students when instructors can show on a projection screen an example of a blended quote used in peer work as well as a published work. The students gain a sense that this is a skill that will be useful in later years.

Hearing an instructor expressing exasperation about becoming stuck in the writing process demystifies the idea that writing comes easily to adults. Any person who has experienced the angst of putting words on a page can relate to students in the same predicament. Reiterates Gallagher, "when teachers do not write, students lose the opportunity to see adults successfully struggle through the writing process" (Gallagher 49). Gallagher quotes Murray when promoting teachers to write "so they understand the process of writing from within. They should know the territory intellectually and emotionally: how you have to think to write, how you feel when writing. Teachers of writers do not have to be great writers, but they should have frequent and recent experience in writing" (Gallagher 72). The key words "frequent and recent experience" are important to explore as they pertain to teachers of writing. If writing frequently improves the confidence and competence for students, it makes sense that writing frequently also improves confidence and competence in writing of teachers. Recent

experience is important because without fresh attempts, like the teacher at the Bard session who had written in twenty years, for instance, efficacy suffers leading to a lowered skill level. Even further, without practice, self doubt steps in, leading to lowered skill level.

Third, trepidation about the task. Mrs. R. is a learning support teacher whose own learning disability leaves her frozen at the thought of writing an essay or academic paper. “I have dysgraphia and had learned how to deal it during high school and college,” she said, describing the challenge that affects fine-motor skills and interferes with the ability to put thoughts on paper. It makes writing a chore for persons with the disability, an example of which Mrs. R shares in her story: “When I went back to update my teaching certificate when I was in my forties, one of the classes required a ten-page paper. I became paralyzed. Couldn’t do it” she recounted. “Luckily one of the professors at the program recognized the disability and allowed me to dictate what I had rather than type it out.” It was an act of kindness from a professor who also had a learning disability in school, she said. Her challenge with writing improves her pedagogy, especially with students who suffer from writing anxiety, written expression deficits audio processing and visual tracking issues. She says, “I identify with the kids.” Her students spend one 45-minute session a day with her in learning support. Her experience with writing and her ability to translate that to her students underscores the point that teachers should be educated in how to teach writing. She is able to share with them the vulnerability that comes with the terrain. Donald Murray in an essay “Teach Writing Your Way” makes a point that teachers must “understand how writing works than how much they

publish” (Murray 179), and Mrs. R’s understanding of how writing works for her helps her students immensely. Interestingly, Mrs. R. says that it is only academic papers and essays that lead her to feel *uneasy* about writing; she is comfortable with more personal writing. “I write poetry, and I journal,” she says noting the enjoyment that it brings her. But she makes a distinction in the different types of writing when she says, “academic writing comes from the head; poetry comes from the heart.” Mrs. R eventually did receive her updated certificate but “it was hard. Very hard.” She inspires her students with her perseverance to add to her credentials and willingness to tackle a difficult challenge.

Some teachers of composition who do not have the challenge of a learning disability struggle with the process themselves because writing well is difficult; they lack confidence in their skill level. Gallagher echoes the difficulty: “Writing is hard – so hard that it has been called the most complex of all human activities” (Gallagher 16). It is complex because it encompasses visual and spatial functions, and it requires the brain strain to clarify thoughts. There is no room for muddled ideas. Writer Anne Lamott in an essay, “Shitty First Drafts,” writes that “we all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time” (Lamott). The writer describes the experience accurately for most teachers of writing. Ellin Oliver Keene, writing on taking on complex chores, says “as learners, in and out of school settings, we all face complex intellectual tasks that we eventually master” (Keene 33). Writing is not easy, but it is essential for teachers of writing to practice the art and be able to know their own voice, stance, and positions on issues that matter in the classroom and

out. We are teaching not only students, but young people who will eventually blend into society and make a difference with their voices.

Eighth-grade teachers, in particular, who may have come up through the K-8 ranks where the focus is on reading, may feel less confident in their writing skills, while those with experience in a secondary or post-baccalaureate curriculum with more emphasis on writing may feel more comfortable. Some teachers simply have not been taught the skills needed to teach writing as “very few states require specific coursework in writing for teacher certification” (Norman and Spencer 25). Even more so, in an essay “Practice, Reflection, and Genre,” David Smit of Kansas State University, states that “nowhere in the secondary and postsecondary English curriculum are there any requirements that teachers be able to write a wide range of discourse themselves or even the kinds of discourse they will be expected to teach their students” (Smit 74). Indeed, much of the middle school and secondary program English curriculum starts with literature as its main focus, with writing about literature being a common assignment: “In general, the emphasis in literacy instruction is on reading, with knowledge of writing pedagogy embedded within reading competency requirements for teachers” (Norman and Spencer 26). Not to downplay writing about literature and the higher order thinking that the writing entails, but if teachers of writing are not versed or trained in the actual teaching of writing, they rely on what they learned during their college programs and the feedback offered from college professors. It depends on the instructor how much attention is paid to pointing out voice and personal risks involved in a piece of writing and how that trickles into middle and secondary classrooms. In some cases, not all

teachers hired to teach English even have that coursework on their resume. With the teacher shortage, instructors with psychology, history, or humanities degrees find themselves teaching English and literature and writing that is part of the curriculum. As head of the English Department at my school, I am experiencing this first-hand with two new teachers in a nine-person department. The novice teachers, one with a degree in psychology and the other in history, are bright and enthusiastic, but due to circumstances, require much support in areas they feel weak in, especially the teaching of writing.

The lack of writing coursework leaves teachers “frightened of writing and unsure, themselves, about the process of writing” (Limbrick et al. 900). A 2007 article in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* cites an editorial in *The Reading Teacher* on instructor self-assessment toward writing: “Teachers sometimes admit reluctantly that they have never liked to write, find writing difficult, don’t have the time to write, and in fact, are not writers” (Mathers et al. 290). It is telling that this statement appeared in *The Reading Teacher* versus a writing pedagogy journal, but these disciplines are intrinsically intertwined and should be approached as one. Gallagher cites National Writing Project affiliate Carl Nagin’s conclusions of studies of the two disciplines when he states, “The emerging research is clear: Writing makes you a better reader, and vice versa” (Gallagher 20). Nagin’s comments give equal weighting to reading and writing at a time when literacy studies tend to focus on reading skills for today’s students. Mrs. A., who formerly taught in a public school setting before joining the faculty of a private school, explained the basis for that thinking: “The thought is how can we teach students to write who haven’t learned how to read.” It is clear that reading affects writing and writing affects

reading and both are required as a model and practice for finding voice. Much like novice painters mimic the work of accomplished artists before settling on their own style, a novice writer can read a highly stylistic author and experiment with voice and vocabulary. For teachers of writing, this is one way to build confidence with the craft.

As such, if teachers who have come to the ranks through education colleges are feeling unsure of themselves, teachers who have come to the classroom through fast-track programs such as Teach for America or Troops for Education may feel doubly unconfident of the writing curriculum. The Teach for America website's language is vague in terms of the actual pedagogy taught in the program. Under a heading "A Lifetime of Opportunity and Support," the Teach for America site states that "corps members go beyond traditional expectations to support the academic and personal growth of their students." Yet, supporting students and teaching them are two vastly different concepts. Supporting can be a passive activity, while teaching takes an active role in lesson planning, creative thinking, and execution. The site says, "we provide corps members with initial training, ongoing professional development, and access to an unparalleled resource and support network." Unfortunately, some reflective reports about service in the program illuminate and reveal frustration with the lack of such training and support, which, obviously, affects instruction in the classroom. One such report published in *The Atlantic*, "I Quit Teach for America," written by a recruit Olivia Blanchard said, "the truth was, the five-week training program had not prepared me adequately." The recruit described being in a convention center in Atlanta, and as a welcome gesture, a group of children played music, "serenading future teachers on the first night of a four-

day-long series of workshops that will introduce us to the complicated language, rituals, and doctrines we will need to adopt as Teach for America ‘Corps Members’” (Blanchard). The spotlight was on the service, not the students. Because recruits were sent to high poverty, low-income schools, the focus of the training was to ensure that teachers were equipped with strategies on classroom management and teaching to a diverse population. Content area skill building and curriculum came second and could not possibly be taught thoroughly within the program’s time frame. In an article about teacher retention in Teach for America ranks, Morgaen L. Donaldson and Susan Moore Johnson noted the “limited induction and support that the TFA teachers probably received in their high-needs schools” (Donaldson and Johnson 50). That point is not lost on several teacher organizations, despite Teach for America’s best intentions: “It became a magnet for criticism from teachers unions, education schools and some policy makers, who argued that sending enthusiastic but untested graduates to classrooms in some of the nation’s poorest communities with just five weeks of training would not produce great teachers” (Rich). With only five weeks of training, teachers of English in our nation’s most needy schools could not possibly address the teaching of writing with precision and practice that is hoped for in school -- and eighth grade -- in particular. If eighth grade can be viewed as a transition year to form foundations for the rigors of high school, teachers weak in content area skills such as thesis writing, sentence structure, and usage will have much studying to do to be able to relay the basic information to students in a constructive way. Needless to say, these same teachers would not have time or

motivation to practice writing skills and take them to a higher level to explore voice and vulnerability.

A final area of trepidation occurs when teachers of writing are not willing to enter that vulnerable space which the writing task requires. There is an element of personal risk in writing that amounts to “a private act with a public result” (Murray 176). Teachers, much like their students, may be reluctant to put their personalities and opinions on a page for all to see. Murray sums it up thusly: “It is frightening to go public. Writing is self-exposure. We reveal ourselves -- how we think, how we feel, who we are -- when we write. We all stand naked on the page” (Murray 177). That sense of exposure also may lead to writing anxiety, which can affect teachers as much as it does students. It causes us to “put a lot of pressure on ourselves when we write” (UNCC). Teachers who may feel comfortable in certain aspects of writing, such as emails to parents or progress reports about students, may experience another level of unease when writing in a different genre, for example, pursuing writing an academic paper (UNCC) or writing blogs or articles that will be seen by peers, the administration, or professional organizations. They find their comfort zone in writing, and, due to fear, fail to challenge themselves to take their craft to the next levels.

Fourth, lack of support in school culture. Teachers who enjoy writing and wish to increase their level of writing efficacy personally or in the classroom may lack opportunities to do so due to a discouraging school culture or limited assortment of professional development opportunities. Cynthia D. Urbanski, who studied writing pedagogy practices at a North Carolina middle school, chronicling them in her book,

Untangling Middle School Reform, identified her frustration after providing three years of teacher writing workshops and writing strategies for the classroom, when she was told “no one in the school had time for writing at all” (Urbanski 27). Near the end of that three years, her administrators were presented with low student performance scores, and the entire focus of the school shifted to “either prepare students for the test (never do anything but test prep) or lose your job” (Urbanski 106). That management directive effectively sapped the passion and creativity of the school’s teachers as well as morale to improve pedagogy. In another case, Nikki Aharonian, a teacher and leader of professional learning in Israel who wrote, “Teacher Writing for Professional Learning: A Narrative,” cites that “varied social, cultural and curriculum contexts in which educators work” may affect dedicated teachers from pursuing professional programs” (Aharonian 115). In her article, Aharonian cites [Ann] Lieberman and [Lynne] Miller, two researchers in teacher professional development, stating the “decision-makers are talking about professional development,” yet they are actively working to ‘deprofessionalize teaching, to fast-track teacher preparation and licensure procedures, to disband tenure, and to devalue teacher experience, discretion, and knowledge in everyday classroom decisions”” (Aharonian 116). In some school cultures, professional development opportunities are identified, yet when applications for substitutes and funds are requested, the opportunities are denied or funds are not readily available. This affects teachers of writing who lack confidence in their skill level and want to improve to be a more effective teacher, let alone those striving to achieve voice and take chances in personal writing.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROFESSIONAL SOLUTIONS

Indeed, professional development seems like the logical, obvious choice for teachers of writing to practice craft, writing on their own. But there are various degrees and practices when it comes to professional workdays. In his book, *Continuing Professional Development: Lifelong Learning of Millions*, Andrew L. Friedman examines the true nature of continued education for teachers as well as other professions, questioning whether governing bodies are doing enough in this area. He writes, “in the past, at least before the last quarter of the twentieth century, it had been sufficient to accept the trustworthiness of professionals based on evidence of initial qualifications (unless we had information to the contrary). Nowadays this is not enough” (Friedman 4). Indeed it is not. Based on advances in technology, pedagogy, and issues facing students, teachers must work to maintain an industry standard and work harder to surpass it. The continuing education system of credits to keep up with pedagogy is met with varying levels of commitment. Sometimes the credits required do not fall in the content area. New teachers are hired based on their university transcripts and references; the extent of a writing sample is supplied in only in a cover letter. Friedman calls out all professions regarding relying on a license as proof of ability: “Just because someone has a certificate to show they are a professional – a school teacher, a doctor, physiotherapist, catering manager or car mechanic – does not automatically mean that they are competent and trustworthy” (Friedman 3). His point is that all professions must continually engage in professional development in order to remain viable and relevant in their industry. He goes on to write, “they may have been up-to-date the day they qualified, but who is to say that 10, 20, even 40 years later that individual is still up-to-date and has the expected range of

competencies?” (Friedman 3). He is saying that lifelong learning is essential, especially for teachers who are in the business of learning and imparting that knowledge to others. Approaches, strategies and confidence levels do change over time. This exemplifies the circumstances of the teacher at the Bard program who had not written a paper in twenty years. To her credit, she recognized the need to improve and had, on her own, decided to attend the weeklong writing program.

Higher standards are needed to ensure academic excellence in composition, and it begins with teachers of writing to know their own voice and be able to teach it. As it stands, current teacher licensure in English encompasses many topics -- reading, literature, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as writing. In private and charter schools, a license is not required to teach any subject, let alone writing. In elementary schools, where writing foundations are first developed, instructors are often generalists who must teach a variety of subjects. No one can master all subjects, yet shortchanging writing pedagogy slights students who will use that skill for life. Not only will they have to write papers for high school and any type of college, but in professional careers and service trades, too. Three years ago, my colleagues and I initiated a Writing Day, backing the Writing Day of the NCTE, in which we invited parents to share with students how they use writing in their jobs. We had bankers who write marketing materials, patrol officers who spend three hours or more writing crime scene reports, and emergency room nurses who chart patients. The students typically are amazed at the number of occupations that require writing and figure out that writing is a skill they should learn. Teachers of writing should know how to write in various genre, but, unfortunately, there is little data that assesses teachers of writing on this issue. Once in the classroom, instructors have little

oversight or guidance provided to evaluate the quality of their effectiveness as Friedman points out. From experience, administrators rarely sit in on classrooms; teachers are monitored based on students' grades and test scores, and that monitoring is at times initiated by a parent request or any behavioral issues that come to light. Teachers who qualify can pursue a National Board Certification that demonstrates "the profession's highest standards for accomplished practice" (NBCT), although a teacher must be in the classroom for three years before undertaking this professional goal. Nevertheless, the NBCT states that 118,000 teachers have done so. The problem is that the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) counts 3.2 million teachers employed in public and private elementary and secondary schools in the United States, meaning obviously a fraction of classroom teachers have attained this standard in the profession. Perhaps there is no incentive to reach a higher level of pedagogy either monetarily or with the faculty. In five years as a full-time instructor, no mentor teacher or administrator has brought up the subject of National Board Certification in a faculty meeting or as a goal in an end-of-the-year evaluation. I know of only two teachers whom I have worked with who have the designation; it seems to be a personal choice.

Professional development opportunities in schools can vary greatly in terms of time as well as content. The quality of these sessions depends on the time that the administration puts into the programs in terms of securing guest speakers, providing a choice of appropriate content, and ensuring that time is maximized and spent wisely. The role of the administration in these sessions is critical because "most teachers report they have little or no say in the professional development schools provide for them" (Bradley-Levine et al. 152). In many instances, the professional development opportunities offered

at mandated school programs lack substance related to curriculum, “comes from the outside, is one-time only, and lacks connection to the culture of the school and its teacher/students” (Bradley-Levine et al. 152). Sessions in technology, student anxiety and/or depression, school accreditation, marketing, and new policy initiatives more than likely drive content of professional development versus core content. Even in core content meetings held four times a year at my school, meeting agendas are established by the administration and mainly focus on administrative issues verses discussion of core content. For example, the English Department was asked to update curriculum initiatives for accreditation in a September meeting of nine teachers. It would have been a marvelous opportunity to reflect on best practices and write in a shared writing community. We ultimately collaborated, but it seemed to be for more of an administrative task.

Professional development opportunities outside the school environment also exist, yet are often costly. The National Writing Project is the most notable for teachers of writing, offering summer institutes at most of its 200 sites across the country. Teachers of writing who wish to attend weeklong writing programs must apply and be accepted to these sessions. Applicants are responsible for paying graduate credit tuition fees of two to four hours, which in-state for the University of North Carolina Charlotte National Writing Project site, for example, can range from \$531 to \$1,063. Out of state costs are significantly higher and range from \$2,178 to \$4,355. Other university programs, such as Bard College’s Writing & Thinking Institute and Middlebury College’s Bread Loaf Program, which is more selective, offer summer sessions in writing, but the costs are considerably higher than those of the National Writing Project and are prohibitive for

many newer teachers on the lower ranges of the pay scale. Bard College offers a five-day session at \$3,000, while Middlebury College's program lasts ten days at \$3,525. Travel is an added expense. What this means to teachers is that it can cost a lot of money to find one's voice -- more than a month's salary for many -- and is an obstacle in seeking additional writing training or finding time to write on their own. School cultures simply don't lend themselves to be cheerleaders to seek this level of intellectual growth. The National Council of Teachers of English holds its annual conference at a much more affordable rate, but cost of travel can also add up for teachers wishing to attend. There are few opportunities for teachers to participate actively at these conferences. Most of the sessions are presented by guest speakers while teachers participate as a passive audience; active workshops in which teachers write, require an additional fee. As a result, even a professional organization for teachers of writing adds on initial fees when it comes to practice the craft of writing, which is somewhat ironic given the level of research, much stemming from the NCTE itself, that teachers of writing should write, never mind finding voice or embracing vulnerability.

Administrators' support and assistance with funds for professional development is crucial to creating a culture in which professional development is a priority and necessary goal for the school community. The writing programs listed above are a catalyst for teachers of writing to take their writing to new ground and providing them opportunities to grow as instructors. As one study pointed out, "promoting a teacher's professional development was the most influential instructional leadership behavior at both the elementary and high school levels" (Blase and Blase 353). The researchers findings show that an administration's investment in professional development pays off in terms of

teacher retention and job satisfaction. It gives instructors a voice in their continuing education. Yet, in many cases, funds for attending conferences can be challenging to attain. In my school, a private middle school in Charlotte, North Carolina, our professional development funds must be approved through the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System, which has its own level of bureaucracy and forms. To apply for funds to attend a National Council of Teachers of English convention, teachers must answer questions such as “what data do you have that supports this initiative?” or “how will you measure the success of the initiative?” Another question is “What are the metrics you will use to evaluate to determine success?” It would be more accommodating to recognize the merits of attending a gathering of a professional organization that has been in existence since 1911 and brings together English instructors from all over the country for a program marketed to teachers as one that “inspires their practice and rejuvenates their profession” (NCTE). It seems reasonable to think that administrators would encourage their employees to participate. Instead the form seems somewhat intimidating and puts one on the defensive. In some cases, even if teachers of writing are able to garner the funds for these programs, there can be other road blocks, such as quashing requests to attend conferences due to a lack of substitutes, necessitating sending only one person on the staff to report back for all or denying the request altogether. That is unfortunate because in a study about teacher perspectives on principals’ attitudes, researchers Joseph Blase and Jo Blase state that “teachers have a strong need for growth” (Blase and Blase 369). Teachers are teachers because they enjoy school and the learning process, and growing intellectually is an important element in job satisfaction. Blase and Blase also

report that despite teachers' inclination for professional growth, these "needs often stand in disappointing contrast to findings about principals' role behaviors and treatment of teachers" (Blase and Blase 370). The administration's attitude toward professional development and its cost-to-value ratio plays a role in the opportunities available for teachers and for the administration as it attempts to retain staff, which is best for students, and keep faculty attitude at its optimum. With the shortage of teachers in school systems, particularly those in rural and low-income areas, administrators should make every attempt to increase the efficacy of teachers who wish to do so. The lack of support for teachers to employ their craft and to find time to hone writing skills is one that must be addressed.

Professional development or other strategies to elevate skills in writing is necessary for any teacher's efforts to rekindle voice and experience risks and vulnerability in writing. When teachers experience those qualities, they will find it much more authentic to impart that knowledge to their students. Powerful writing comes from a place in the mind and heart that a person must tap into. Uninspired writing -- writing without thought -- comes across as wooden and formulaic. It lacks personality. But finding that point of inspiration through voice and vulnerability creates writing that is more passionate, ultimately more readable, and a possible agent for change. It is a departure in some classrooms from a hefty plate of bland vocabulary exercises, five paragraph essays, grammar and conventions. It is a pedagogy that evokes emotion, creativity, and student interest. Linda Rief, a middle school English teacher in Durham, New Hampshire, who also teaches at the University of New Hampshire's Summer

Literacy Institute, underscores that point in her essay, “Writing: Commonsense Matters,” when she states, “when writers are engaged in the process of writing something that matters to them, for which they have their own purposes, that writing often surprises, delights, and empowers them, encouraging a stronger commitment to the crafting of writing” (Rief 192). Teachers and students must write on a personal level on an issue of importance and express their voice in order to elevate writing. Some might argue that if students cannot adhere to conventions, how can they be inspired to dig down and create on a higher level? Writing teachers who have experience writing realize that the process is an exploration, and there are many steps in the journey. Teachers of writing elevate composition instruction when they encourage students to find voice, experience risks, create empathy, and demystify the writing process. Those who write, who are trained in writing, and who take the time to write themselves are more apt to impart these topics to students.

Finding Voice. By the time students reach eighth grade, they are conditioned to listen, follow, please be quiet, or line up in a row. Not that all of them do, however. There are those who challenge authority and those who try to please. Nancy Atwell, in her book, *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*, describes the traditional culture well: “Schools tell junior high kids that their active participation is too risky an enterprise. It’s safer to keep them quiet, passive, under control, to avoid any acknowledgement that our students’ needs, tastes, and values are, alarmingly, not our own” (Atwell 54). These directives are painful to witness. Applying that sentiment to writing, Atwell is saying that as long as students do what teachers say in the way they

write, all is well. This approach is not ideal; it can be destructive. Teachers of writing are in a position to foster students' ability to express themselves and allow their personalities to emerge through their written work. Those who write know the creativity and passion necessary to complete a project and the raw risks one must take. Teachers of writing in middle school assign expository writing, argumentation, and critical analysis, and those instructors should be competent in all genres in an effort to be effective teachers and pass those skills to their students. Writing along with their students would be beneficial in modeling the ability to craft a piece in their own voice and experience the pride in a well-written work. Those teachers who focus on mechanics versus content hinder the critical thinking skills and creativity of a student to find his or her voice. The textbooks focus on the process -- brainstorming, pre-writing, writing, revision; the textbooks do not teach voice or how to peel back the layers required for writing that is full of life. In the end, young writers come to appreciate that what they have to say matters, and that they do have an opinion on many topics. Teachers who can assist students to break through the indoctrination and find voice because they know their own can help bridge a crucial transition in their students' educational life. Lind Rief, who taught middle school herself, goes so far as highlighting that "the best writing not only gives us voice but is filled with voice" (Rief 199). She quotes University of Miami, Ohio, professor and former high school English teacher Tom Romano on the subject describing voice as the "writer's presence in a piece of writing" (Rief 199) through sharing narratives and observations. Teachers trained in teaching writing and who practice their own writing can effectively impart that knowledge of voice to their students.

Experiencing risks. Teachers who write are much more able to prepare students for some of the insecurity involved in exposing one's personality and ideas on paper for a teacher, peer, or public to see. They, too, have experienced the vulnerability at having another person critique their writing; they also know the delight when accolades come their way. As stated earlier in this essay, at the eighth grade level, at a time of life when teenagers avoid uncomfortable situations at all costs, some students avoid peer editing sessions. In my classes, some will pull me off to the side with a look of panic across their normally easygoing expressions. For those in a sweat, I relent and allow them to work alone. However, I encourage those grappling with the idea of another person reading their writing to relax and allow the process to take course. They might learn something new about their writing and the process. The anxiety of sharing work that is close to the heart is part of the emotion of writing. It is the same for adults as well as we seek opportunities for teachers to write because "writing is bound to conceptions of self," (Chandler 60); only a person who writes can relay those experiences that strike at one's identity and reassure students that the unlayering is part of the process to more compelling work. It is what I experienced at the Bard College program that was the foundation for this thesis. As I became more comfortable writing in the group setting, I let the mask fall off and began writing in a more personal and intimate way, approaching topics I never thought I would in public writing. I revealed deeply held emotions that were powerful for me to see on a page, and my peers read the words with kindness and empathy.

Creating empathy. As I write these sentences, I am mindful that my eighth grade English students have an essay due tomorrow in class and likely are experiencing the

same trials and tribulations at getting their thoughts on the page as I am in finishing a 60-page thesis. Although the 96 students wrote most of the material in class over the course of the week, broken down into a step-by-step process, there were a handful who still seemed befuddled even days after a working thesis was due. On a Friday afternoon, while the student body enjoyed a pep rally, a few uneasy students chose to remain in the room and work in a small group as they were behind on the paper. In a small group setting, they were able to express their fears about writing and work past the obstacles. Teachers who have experienced the agony of working through a difficult part of an essay or piece of writing can empathize with students encountering the same feelings. I confronted just that working on this thesis when I came to a part of the piece in which I felt stuck. Additional research relieved some sense of anxiety, and I was able to use reflection to overcome the challenge. I wish I would have reached out to fellow students or writers to collaborate and get feedback in an effort to move forward rather than work in isolation. Much like literary analysis essays I assign to students, this 60-page thesis was all new to me. I could relate to what the students who stayed behind in the classroom that one day were feeling. Working together with students and sharing a lesson that facing a hurdle is commonplace in writing helped counter in them the idea that if one gets stuck, it is not a sign a bad writer. This is what they have internalized over the years. Sending students off to struggle on their own would have been hardhearted and possibly could have affected the student's views on writing in the future. Students in these scenarios don't need criticism, they need empathy. Kimberly A. Norman and Brenda H. Spencer in a piece published in *Teacher Educated Quarterly* researched preservice teachers' experiences and attitudes toward

writing instruction and identified two factors that influenced the novice instructors as writers: one) having chances to be creative in their writing, and two) “having a caring, supportive teacher” (Norman and Spencer 32). Writing teachers must be able to put themselves in their students’ mindset to help them gain confidence because “teachers have both positive and negative effects on writing identity” (Norman and Spencer 29). As discussed in the review of literature, teachers’ attitudes toward writing affect how they present the subject to students. They can be upbeat and positive, or they can present writing as a necessary chore. It would be similar to a military command who, trying to muster troops, showed hesitation at the mission. Students rely on an experienced teacher to lead the way, and in writing, that experienced path is to write with voice and come to appreciate the personal gamble that one must take on when putting words on a page.

Demystifying the writing process. Teachers of writing who write have the ability and experience to deconstruct the process of writing, particularly for those who struggle with an assignment or have overriding challenges that influence the way a student learns. They will benefit more students in the long run. Teachers who write and put their soul into their work are better able to explain a concept three different ways, unlike a teacher who does not write. Ginnie Curtis states in the article “The Impact of Teacher Efficacy and Beliefs on Writing Instruction,” “writing is a difficult skill for educators to instruct and students to master. It ... requires explicit instruction by a trained teacher” (Curtis 17). While the writing process is often taught in stages, such as prewriting or revising, many students do not have enough of a grasp on content in order to comprehend even the step-by-step directions. By eighth grade, when the writing assignments require more critical

thinking and analyses, students can no longer sit at their computers in one 45-minute session, composing an essay in free flow form, which is many students' method of choice as they stated in their reflections on writing in the beginning of the year. They must take their time and be walked through a procedure to be more effective. And sometimes even that is not enough. When attempting to write a second thesis of the year, one student became overly frustrated with the concept of writing one well-crafted sentence. As he put it, "I don't even understand what I don't understand." A vulnerability oozed through his speaking voice as he worked hard in preliminary stages to develop a written one. As a writing teacher who has experienced this feeling attempting projects beyond my comfort zone, I could walk back certain points until a glimmer came across his face, and he said, "I get it. I get it."

If teachers of writing are struggling with ways to practice writing and finding the time to write themselves, there are several ways that they can make a commitment to reach that level of efficacy beyond standard professional development programs: action research, blogging, finding outlets for low stakes writing for publication, or joining a professional learning community to collaborate and reflect. Again, eighth-grade instructors have a remarkable ability to affect students' writing skills as they find themselves between teaching to state writing tests in seventh grade and the rigors of writing in ninth grade, in high school when transcripts become part of a permanent record. Being trained in writing and taking the time to write is an important element in our work as writing teachers.

Action Research: Teachers have a powerful tool in promoting their own professional development and writing by examining practices that are occurring in their own classrooms and using them to create change in their pedagogy as well as school culture. In an article “Practical Strategies for Facilitating Classroom Teachers’ Involvement in Action Research,” the authors describe action research as beginning “with a teachers’ questions and aims at influencing practice” (Sardo-Brown et al. 553). Teachers work together to tackle a question, such as the lack of time to practice writing, and find solutions within their communities. It is an opportunity for teachers to engage in “this trend in the scholarship of teaching and learning” in which “educators must find time and support to engage in meaningful interactions with peers and create spaces for peer observation, reflection, and dialogue around their practice as a whole” (Bradley-Levine et al. 153). If teachers are not getting the support or opportunities for traditional professional development, action research is way for self-motivated instructors to take on problems of their school communities and find viable solutions. For teachers of writing who wish to find time to write, identifying opportunities in faculty meetings or proposing writing as part of teacher workdays would be an avenue of redress.

Blogging: Creating or contributing to blogs is a low-stakes strategy to use writing skills for publication and establish a sense of voice in writing. Because blogs are published online for the world to view, they most decidedly demand that authors put their vulnerability on the line as many readers take the opportunity to leave comments whether positive or negative, especially if the issue is a controversial one. Nevertheless, this sense of vulnerability also builds a sense of community when readers offer support and

encouragement. Two instructors who both have experience teaching at the middle school level, Deborah Dean and Adrienne Warren, discuss the social aspects of blogging in their article, “Informal and Shared: Writing to Create Community.” They relay the story of a teacher who took up blogging to engage in writing every day and how “through writing and sharing -- and nothing more -- these bloggers built a community that matters. From this experience, [the blogger] learned a valuable lesson about the power of writing to build community” (Dean and Warren 50). By writing informally in a blog format, teachers, as well as their students, “know that they can write regularly, that they have something to say” and “develop fluency, the ability to put thoughts into words” (Dean and Warren 52). They begin to hone their voices. Teachers who practice this type of writing are more able to impart the meaning of voice against those who do not write at all. Blogging provides teachers a backdrop to build learning communities and writing groups to help reestablish or develop voice.

Lower stakes writing for publication: If on the rare occasions teachers do find time to write, those inclined will find an outlet to share experiences, lessons, or reflections -- more lower stakes writing -- in one of the National Council of Teacher’s of English ten publications, such as the quarterly *Voices from the Middle*, which publishes “original contributions” by middle school teachers and teacher educators, offering “ideas for classroom use,” (NCTE). This is a solid venue for teachers to have a chance to write without having to take the time to do extensive research as one would for publication in a scholarly article. They can describe perspectives -- highlights and challenges -- from their own classroom. “Teacher-authors perceive themselves as capable of creating ideas to be

shared with others. Writing for publication provides opportunities for self-expression and exercising their own voice, thus developing a sense of authorship” (Rathert and Okan 364). Teachers in the classroom do enjoy discussing their experiences in the classroom as one of the joys of teaching is being able to reach a student and create that “aha” moment when a person finally understands the challenge before him or her. It is an area of personal writing in which teachers have the opportunity to share their voices.

A professional learning community in which teachers and instructors can come together in small group settings, carving out the time to write, research, and share feedback, is another productive way to inspire teachers of writing to write. This is what I experienced at the Bard College program and one that I found most inspirational and enlightening. In a 2018 position paper, “Understand and Teaching Writing: Guiding Principles,” the NCTE states “in a community of feedback, teachers become learners too because they inquire with learners about why writers make the choices they do” (NCTE). Among the discussion points are “both products and processes” (NCTE). Indeed, any teacher of writing knows that not only is the final literary analysis, poem, or reflection an important student outcome, it is also meaningful how a student approaches the writing process and improves on one or more steps in order to build confidence and competence in the skill. Teachers of writing who do not write may miss this significant point.

Teachers wishing to write on a more consistent basis may find that collaborating in writing support circles or online support circles provide opportunities to kindle or reignite the passion for writing in a safe environment, sparking creativity which leads to finding voice and vulnerability. It is a space where I was able to reflect and collaborate

with like-minded writers and teachers. The positive aspects about collaboration with myriad technology available is that it can take place in classrooms, span school districts, or develop online to create material “deeper than each individual writer would have achieved alone” (Aharonian 117). Writing support circles are particularly beneficial for English Second Language learners and those who lack writing skills who have found their way into the classroom. Learning how to collaborate as writers is important to know and to impart to students as many real-life careers, such as advertising, marketing, finance, and public policy, employ collaborative writing. No longer are executives writing in a vacuum without having someone up the chain of command adding comments and providing input to the work. The teaching profession is no different. Teachers can find no-cost support in writing groups at local libraries. In North Carolina in the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library system, adult writing groups vary to writing on a certain topic or offering peer criticism of works in progress. I have attended lively group discussions of dedicated writers who are working on books, short stories, and poetry for personal enjoyment or for publication. The time commitment is one hour a month, and sessions are free to the public. Teachers should also be encouraged to create writing groups within their own schools as a way to practice writing. Much like book clubs, writing clubs bring people together with a shared intellectual pursuit and motivation to grow. It is an opportunity for teachers of writing to share their voices and put their writing on the line for the others to read.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

When I first searched for professional development opportunities to improve my abilities as a writing instructor, I stumbled across the Bard College's program, the Thinking & Writing Institute, in a search on the Internet. I thought that the idea of teachers coming together to participate and actively write in a seminar was far superior to one in which I passively sat and listened to guest speakers. I knew that writing every day would strengthen my skills and get my creative sensibilities sparked once again. I knew that I could take that knowledge back to my students. That all the participants were teachers with similar experiences in the classroom and a propensity to share ideas and strategies appealed to me as well. I was delighted when I arrived to learn that instructors taught not only in the United States, but in France, Russia, China, and Canada as well as other areas of the world where educational systems and expectations for student outcomes were different.

It took about three years for me to find the time to apply to attend such a program given my engagement in Master of Arts degree work in English at Winthrop University. It took three weeks for me to convince my administrators that this was a worthwhile endeavor, and though I was glad to share costs, it would be a professional boon and vote of confidence for the school to participate as a benefactor and provide some funding to offset the bill. My initial application was met with a denial due to circumstances set forth above -- it was deemed too much money for one person's professional development. Appealing to the Bard program, however, for any type of scholarship, and my school principal, who saw intellectual merit in the weeklong session, I was able to gain approval.

That program became the foundation for this thesis and a commitment to improving skills in the teaching of writing.

Meeting an English instructor at that Bard College program who had not written a paper in twenty years was a telling moment for me; one that put a question in my head as to how many other instructors of writing had not written for a lengthy period of time. I was empathetic, too, because I saw how overwhelmed that instructor was at the thought of a three-page essay assignment. She was visibly taken aback, but she persevered and pushed through to share her work the next day. As a former journalist, I did not have a problem with writing an essay in a short amount of time, but what I did notice throughout the seminar was that this safe writing community brought out another level in my writing. I was not merely putting words on a page, but I was sharing my personality, my voice, and my vulnerability with a group of like-minded instructors in a way that I had never done before. It led to me to ponder how I, as an eighth-grade instructor, could make a difference in the attitudes toward writing in my students and instill in them that same level of creativity and confidence. I have since joined a writing group and sought out other writers in the community to practice the craft. Other teachers, especially those in middle school and eighth grade have the unique opportunity to elevate their skills to benefit their students in the long term. The shared writing community at Bard led me to appreciate that teachers of writing must write to know their own voice and embrace vulnerability to share that level of competency with their students.

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